CHAPTER 5

IN SEARCH OF EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT, AND MORE

Looking for a Solution in Faraway Places

Immigration as a Response to the Ban and Başörtülü Kadınlar of the Diaspora

The headscarf ban motivated başörtülü kadınlar to look for alternatives for education and work opportunities beyond the borders of Turkey. A cross-generational ban led me to move to the United States in 1988 as a sophomore in medical school, and a few years later my mother, who was teaching German literature at the university, was forced to resign due to her headscarf.¹ Today my daughters (who also wear headscarves) are pursuing their graduate studies in the United States. After years of sporadic individual migrations, the post-modern coup of 1997 was the beginning of a mass migration of some 3,000 başörtülü kadınlar to Europe.² Austria, in particular, provided hope for them. Vienna University offered transfer opportunities in addition to free education. Some başörtülü kadınlar scattered around Europe and the Turkic states of the former Soviet Union. A few migrated to Canada and were granted political asylum due to their suffering in the hands of the Turkish security forces.³ The United States was a preferred destination for başörtülü kadınlar who either had their families’ financial backing or received scholarships. The ones who received scholarships or grants from the Ministry of Education were not relieved from the ban’s burden. The embassies and local consulates kept students under surveillance and, at times, suspended students’ grants for anti-secular activities, such as wearing of the headscarf and attending international conferences with headscarves. Eastern bloc countries and Northern Cyprus became popular destinations for başörtülü kadınlar due to their geographic proximity. Education was relatively inexpensive
there as well. Nonetheless, the headscarf ban spread to Bulgaria and Cyprus under the sway of the Turkish regime. The Orientalized Orientals paid particular attention to the developments with respect to the headscarf issue in neighboring countries. They expressed their concern and disgruntlement without reservation if they saw neighboring countries allowing başörtülü kadınlar into their universities. Cyprus, which was dubbed the “baby of the homeland,” quickly caved to the pressures from Turkey. Despite its disadvantages, migration had positive implications for young başörtülü kadınlar. There are many undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students among the başörtülü kadınlar of the diaspora. Some students of junior high and high schools also joined with older students in the diaspora. If it had not been for the ban, one could not have fathomed these women leaving their families behind to embark on a new life somewhere else—learning new languages and acquiring knowledge about different peoples and cultures. Most of them did not know the language of their new countries before leaving Turkey. Despite the implications of being away from loved ones and often feeling homesick, this experience helped them become stronger and widely perceptive. In some ways, it was almost a blessing in disguise. It would be an apt conjecture to argue that if and when the ban is repealed, başörtülü kadınlar, who are well equipped with the knowledge in their fields of specialization (and maybe even overqualified by Turkish standards), will return home to serve their country with integrity.

**Awkward Positionings and Postures**

The longer their struggle lasted, the more many başörtülü kadınlar learned to become independent. With lack of support from their own communities, they found strength in each other and in the community of başörtüsi mağdurları. Years of protests, confrontations, and negotiations taught them how to be stronger advocates of their cause. It also helped them to learn about the democratic machinery and adopt its instruments. They were, in a way, part of a democratizing journey—albeit inadvertently, they contributed to the democratization processes. They were on their own, and they were fighting for themselves alone. In particular, the fact that the private enterprises owned by religious Muslims, as well as their academic and Islamist communities, failed to provide unconditional support for them or remained at a distance played a significant role in this journey.

In this endeavor, they empowered themselves by resisting the ban, becoming politically active, and protesting the ban on campuses. Empowerment within the inner worlds led to an increased yearning for existence in the public sphere. Although they were never allowed to be